

Cooperating School and Teacher Characteristics: What is Important in the Student Teacher Placement Process?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the important elements of student teaching as perceived by teacher educators and how well each student teacher perceived his/her quality of student teaching experience. Two questionnaires were used to gather information from 6 different teacher educators and 58 student teachers. Teacher educators indicated that the school having technology infrastructure, an active FFA program and having multiple facilities such as laboratories in agriculture mechanics, greenhouse, and land were important elements to consider when choosing a cooperating school. Additionally, the cooperating teachers of those schools should be a good role models, mentors, and have organizational skills that are exceptional. Student teachers indicated that they were pleased with their overall experience and felt they were placed in an excellent facility. The student teachers learned a great deal from their semester experience and felt that it was the most valuable component of their teacher education program.

Key Words: student teaching, cooperating teacher, cooperating school, mentor, placement

Introduction

The quality of agricultural education programs in the secondary public schools in the United States greatly depends on the effectiveness of the teacher preparation programs and the teachers that these programs produce (McGhee & Cheek, 1989). There is general agreement among researchers that student teaching is a key aspect in the teacher education program (Glickman & Bey, 1990; McIntyre, Byrd, & Fox, 1996). Student teachers must have a satisfying experience in order to retain these prospective teachers in to the agriculture education teaching field (Izadinia, 2016; Rome & Moss, 1990). Entry of student teachers into the agriculture teaching field is important given the demand for the teachers. NAAE (2015) states that there is a growing need for certified agriculture teachers in the United States. In the past, many teacher education programs have developed specific criteria and characteristics for selecting schools and teachers, but unfortunately not all student teachers of these programs were receiving a good experience (Rome & Moss, 1990). This begs the question: Does the rigor and energy put forth in student teacher placement result in commensurate experiences for the student teachers?

Far too often, models placing student teachers with cooperating schools and teachers are developed out of mere convenience for the supervising teachers, as well as the student teacher (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; K-16 Teacher Education Task Force, 2000).

Academic excellence of the cooperating school was disregarded, and the convenience of being close to the campus or the student's home and willingness of the cooperating school to participate prompted the program directors of the particular teacher education program toward usage of that cooperating school (K-16 Teacher Education Task Force, 2000). Kern (2004) identified that one of the major obstacles of the student teaching supervision was time considerations for faculty supervisors who commute to numerous cooperating school sites in one semester. There has always been a growing need for research in the area of choosing effective cooperating schools and teachers to provide the best and most effective experience for the practicing student teacher (Bullough, 2005; Stewart et al., 2017).

Harlin, Edwards, and Briers (2002) and Akhter et al. (2016) conducted studies on student teacher perceptions of the important elements of the student teaching experience. Rather, this particular study seeks to determine teacher educator perceptions of what elements the cooperating school and teacher should possess when placing student teachers. The information gained from the perceptions could be used by teacher education programs in making future decisions about the placement of student teachers with cooperating teachers and schools. Teacher education programs could choose placement criteria based on the teacher educators' ratings of the important elements of the student teaching experience. The student teaching experience, if properly conducted, is extremely important to the student teacher and has an impact on the student teacher's future decision of entering the teaching profession (Conant, 1963; Paulsen et al., 2016). Satisfaction from the student teaching experience has become an important aspect of retention to the profession. Borne and Moss (1988) studied student teachers' self-perceived level of preparation and concluded that first year teachers rated their level of preparation of teaching as acceptable. The researchers also found that specific teaching duties and educational goals improved as a result of student teaching (Borne & Moss, 1988). Rome and Moss (1990) also strongly agreed that student teaching was a positive experience and strongly disagreed that student teaching was of little or no value to the teacher education program.

The purpose of this study was to determine the important elements of the student teaching experience as perceived by teacher educators and how well each student teacher perceived his/her quality of experience based on these criteria.

The following research questions were proposed for the study:

1. What were the personal and professional characteristics of teacher educators of agriculture?
2. What were the personal and professional characteristics of student teachers of agriculture?
3. What were the teacher educator perceptions of important elements of a cooperating center and teacher?
4. What was the quality of the student teaching experience as perceived by student teachers in agricultural education?

Materials and Methods

The research was *ex post facto* in nature due to the fact that the causes were studied after the student teaching experience. All student teachers surveyed had already completed the student teaching experience.

The target population of this study consisted of agriculture teacher preparation programs in Illinois. For each program, data were sought from practicing head teacher educators and teacher educators in Illinois as defined by the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) directory. There were 4 teacher education programs according to the AAAE directory. Two subgroups from each teacher education program were used. The first subgroup consisted of recent graduates of the four teacher education programs. The second subgroup consisted of faculty with responsibilities in the student teacher placement or supervisory process ("teacher educators").

Two different mail questionnaires were used for teacher educators and recent graduates of the program. The teacher educator survey attempted to assess the teacher educator perceptions of the important characteristics and criteria when choosing a cooperating school and teacher. The researcher contacted Facilitating Coordination in Agricultural Education (FCAE) organization to gather contact information of those student teachers graduating from the programs. The faculty involved in the teacher education program answered those questions pertaining to important elements of the cooperating center and teacher. The student teacher survey attempted to discover the student teacher's overall experience while a student teacher. Each student teacher survey was coded as to the university or college from which the respondent graduated.

All instruments sent to teacher educators at each of the three universities responded to the questions, thus yielding a 100 percent response rate. Additionally, 91 student teacher instruments were sent out. Of the 91 student teachers, 58 responded for a 64% response rate. To account for nonresponse error, the researcher randomly contacted 20 nonrespondents and asked a series of demographic questions. Respondents and nonrespondents were compared using an independent samples t-test. The researcher concluded that there were no statistically significant differences in any of the questions; therefore, the responding sample was deemed to be representative of the population of student teachers in Illinois.

SPSS 24.0 software was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to familiarize the reader with the demographics of the teacher educators and the student teachers. Frequencies, percentages, measures of central tendency, and variability were all used to fully describe the data that were collected by the researcher. Rankings were used to determine the important elements of the cooperating school and teacher as perceived by teacher educators. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the reliability of each scale of the instrument. If a certain item decreased the alpha, it was eliminated to increase the final alpha. After the highest Cronbach's alpha was achieved, each section was compiled into a composite mean for each teacher educator and student teacher. The individual means were then aggregated to form an overall school mean.

Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 1, the typical teacher educator was male (83.3%), Anglo in descent (83.3), and held a Ph.D (100%). Table 2 illustrates that there were a few more male ($n = 33$) student teachers than females ($n = 25$). The typical student teacher was 22 to 25 years of age (51.7%), Anglo (98.3%), and had been teaching between 1 and 5 years (98.3%). A majority ($n = 42$; 81.0%) of the student teacher's student taught in a school with 500 or fewer students. A few ($n = 3$; 5.7%) student teacher's student taught in a large school with a capacity of 1200 or more students.

When assessing the size of the school, it was deemed necessary to assess the number of classrooms that the student teachers had at their cooperating school. Table 2 indicates that a majority ($n = 49$; 94.3%) of the student teachers taught in a school with one or two classrooms while the remaining (5.7%) in a school with more than two classrooms. Facilities of the student teachers' cooperating school were determined by a series of questions presented to the student teachers. A majority of the student teachers' cooperating schools contained an agricultural mechanics laboratory (92.3%), a greenhouse structure (63.5%), and a land laboratory (63.5%). Few of the cooperating schools contained an aquaculture facility (38.5%) or an animal project center (3.8%). None of the student teachers' cooperating centers contained a meats laboratory.

Teacher educators were asked through a series of questions what they thought were important elements when deciding where to place students to complete the student teaching experience. As shown in Table 3, the results are presented as both individual means and an aggregate mean of the three universities in Illinois, excluding the one that the researcher resided in. All of the teacher educators indicated that student access to the World Wide Web was a highly important consideration to look for when placing student teachers. Additionally, other elements revolving around information technology were ranked important: access to World Wide Web ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.41$) and email access ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.41$). Teacher educators indicated that a school having an active FFA chapter ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.55$) was very important when placing student teachers. The teacher educators also felt that using the school only once a year was important in the placement process. Facilities and being a comprehensive school were not as high on the list as the other elements, but teacher educators still deemed them moderately important to examine before placing a student teacher. The additional element rankings can be found in Table 3.

In addition to assessing teacher educators' perceptions of the cooperating school, they were asked to assess what they thought were important elements that the cooperating teacher must possess before placing a student teacher. As shown in Table 4, teacher educators felt it was very important for the cooperating teacher to be an excellent role model ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.0$), have a positive attitude ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 0.0$), provide frequent evaluations to their student teachers ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.41$), and practice good student management skills in both the classroom and laboratory environment ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.41$). The least important cooperating teacher factors included dress ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.84$) and helping the student teacher in the job placement procedure ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.63$).

Table 5 displays the student teachers' perceptions regarding the quality of their overall student teaching experience. The results are presented as both individual and an aggregate of the four universities in Illinois. The former student teachers indicated that their cooperating teachers were helpful ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.03$), their experience was educational ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.95$) and that student teaching was the most valuable component of the teacher education program ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.01$). Student teachers had a positive experience and indicated that their cooperating center was an excellent facility that gave them a realistic example of actual teaching.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Teacher educators in this study were predominately the male (83.3%), Anglo in descent (83.3%), and held a Ph.D (100%). During the student teaching placement process, teacher educators indicated many elements of importance regarding the cooperating school. Some of those included the school having technology infrastructure and access to readily available email. Additionally, the teacher educators strongly suggested that the cooperating school have an active FFA program and have access to multiple facilities including laboratories such as agriculture mechanics, greenhouse, and land. Teacher educators also indicated characteristics that are desirable for cooperating teachers to possess when placing student teachers. The cooperating teachers should be a good role model, mentor, and have organizational skills that are exceptional. When examining perceptions of the student teachers on their experience during student teaching, it was discovered that the majority of the students indicated that they were pleased with their overall experience and felt they were placed in an excellent facility. The student teachers learned a great deal from their semester experience and felt that it was the most valuable component of their teacher education experience. Based on the findings and conclusions in this study, student teaching in agriculture should continue. Data indicate that student teaching was a positive experience for most student teacher respondents. This recommendation concurs with the research conducted by Rome and Moss (1990) who found that student teachers strongly agreed that student teaching was a positive experience. Teacher educators should continue to spend time to determine what the ideal cooperating teacher and cooperating school should possess and use these measures to place student teachers in the most "ideal" cooperating center. Although this may take time since the teacher educator has to research the cooperating school and teacher to discover if they possess these important elements, it will be well worth it in the long run to help fill the demand for quality agriculture teachers. Similar to Abel, Ansel, Hauwiler, and Sparapani (1986) teacher education programs should use several qualifications and criteria when selecting new cooperating centers and cooperating teachers. These include cooperating teachers that have a willingness to devote time each day to the student teacher, have an ability to motivate students, are well organized, and have an interest in professional improvement. The researchers also state that the cooperating center should be selected on the quality of the supervised agriculture experience program, the physical facilities and condition of equipment, the curriculum offered, and the extent of activity of the FFA program. Teacher educators show invest "energy" in selecting student teacher centers by researching potential school and teachers and the characteristics they possess to determine if they are a good fit. With this process in place and the energy invested by the teacher educators, the odds of these teachers entering the field would be increased, thus filling the void of qualified agriculture teachers in the United States (NAAE, 2015).

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Table 1
Selected Characteristics of Teacher Educators in Illinois (N = 6)

Characteristics	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Male	5	83.3
Female	1	16.7
Ethnicity		
African-American	1	16.7
Anglo	5	83.3
Hispanic	0	0.0
Native-American/Alaskan	0	0.0
Professorial Ranking		
Instructor/Lecturer	0	0.0
Associate Professor	0	0.0
Assistant Professor	4	66.7
Professor	1	16.7
Other	1	16.7
Tenure Status		
Tenured	2	33.3
Not Tenured, but Tenure Track	4	66.7
Not Tenure Track		
Highest Degree Earned		
Ph.D.	6	100.0
Ed.D.	0	0.0
MS, MA, MBA	0	0.0

Table 2

Selected Characteristics of Student Teachers (N = 58)

Characteristics	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Male	33	56.9
Female	25	43.1
Age		
22 to 25 years	30	51.7
26 to 29 years	21	36.2
30 to 35 years	3	5.2
> 35 years	4	6.9
Ethnicity		
African-American	1	1.7
Anglo	57	98.3
Hispanic	0	0.0
Pacific Islander	0	0.0
Teacher Certification		
Through an Accredited University in Illinois	51	87.9
Through an Accredited University Outside of Illinois	1	1.7
Provisionally or Alternatively Certified	6	10.4
Years Teaching Agriculture		
1 to 2	33	57.9
3 to 5	23	40.4
6 or more	1	1.7
Size of Schools Student Teachers Taught In		
500 or Less Students	42	81.0
501 to 900 Students	6	11.5
901 to 1200 Students	1	1.8
1200 or More Students	3	5.7
Number of Classrooms Student Teachers Had at Their Cooperating Schools		
One Classroom	33	63.5
Two Classrooms	16	30.8
Three Classrooms	2	3.8
More Than Three Classrooms	1	1.9
Facilities Student Teachers' Cooperating Schools Contained		
Agriculture Mechanics Laboratory	48	92.3
Greenhouse	33	63.5
Some Other Horticulture Facility	10	19.2
Meats Laboratory	0	0.0
Aquaculture Facility	20	38.5
Land Laboratory	33	63.5
Project Center/Feeding Facility	2	3.8

Table 3

Perceptions of Teacher Educators Regarding Important Elements of a Cooperating Center

Important Elements The Ideal Cooperating Center Should Have:	Individual			Aggregate (School)			Rank **
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
Student access to World Wide Web	6	5.00	.00	3	5.00	.00	1
Access to World Wide Web	6	4.83	.41	3	4.89	.19	2
Email access	6	4.83	.41	3	4.89	.19	2
An active FFA chapter	6	4.50	.55	3	4.61	.35	3
Used only once a year	6	3.83	1.17	3	3.89	.19	4
Located in a comprehensive high school	6	3.5	1.04	3	3.83	1.04	5
A clean safety record	6	3.67	1.03	3	3.78	.38	6
A requirement for all students to participate in a SAE	6	3.67	1.03	3	3.78	.38	6
Agriculture mechanics laboratory	6	3.67	.82	3	3.72	.25	7
Cooperation from local administration	6	3.83	.98	3	3.67	.58	8
Greenhouse / horticulture facilities	6	3.83	.75	3	3.61	.67	9
A record of outstanding accomplishments	6	3.33	1.03	3	3.50	.50	10
An updated library	6	3.17	.98	3	3.17	.29	11
Aquaculture facility	6	3.5	1.04	3	3.17	1.04	11
Project center for SAE projects	6	3.00	1.26	3	2.89	1.01	12
A student teacher ratio of 75 or fewer students to one teacher	6	2.83	.75	3	2.89	.19	12
Land laboratory	6	2.83	.98	3	2.78	1.07	13
A multiple teacher agriculture department	6	3.5	1.04	3	2.00	.00	14
Meats laboratory	6	2.00	.63	3	2.00	.00	14

* Scale: 1= unimportant, 2= of little importance, 3= moderately important, 4 = important, and 5 = very important

** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Table 4

Perceptions of Teacher Educators Regarding Important Elements of a Cooperating Teacher

Important Elements The Ideal Cooperating Teacher Should :	Individually			Aggregate			Rank **
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
Be a good role model	6	5.00	0.0	3	5.00	.00	1
Have a positive attitude	6	5.00	0.0	3	5.00	.00	1
Provide frequent evaluations and feedback to the student teacher	6	4.83	.41	3	4.89	.19	2
Practice good student management skills in both the classroom and laboratory environment	6	4.83	.41	3	4.67	.58	3
Display continual professional growth	6	4.50	.55	3	4.44	.51	4
Communicate clear expectations to the student teacher	6	4.50	.55	3	4.44	.51	4
Practice a variety of teaching methodology	6	4.50	.55	3	4.39	.35	5
Be willing to be a mentor	6	4.67	.81	3	4.33	1.15	6
Have discipline policies in place	6	4.33	.82	3	4.33	.58	6
Support other school activities	6	4.00	.89	3	4.28	.86	7
Practice good housekeeping in the classroom and laboratory	6	4.17	.98	3	4.22	.69	8
Train Leadership Development and Career Development Event teams to reinforce student learning	6	3.67	1.03	3	3.83	.76	9
Have a teaching style observed by the teacher education program	6	3.83	.75	3	3.72	.75	10
Be willing to make daily changes for student teachers	6	3.50	1.05	3	3.72	.94	10
Dress in an exemplary manner	6	3.50	.84	3	3.67	.58	11
Assist the student teacher in job placement	6	3.00	.63	3	3.06	.42	12

*Scale: 1= unimportant, 2= of little importance, 3= moderately important, 4 = important, and 5 = very important

** Ranked by aggregate mean score

Table 5

Perceptions of Student Teachers Regarding the Quality of Their Student Teaching Experience

Important Elements							
Overall Student Teaching Experience:	Individual			Aggregate			Rank
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	**
My cooperating teacher was helpful	52	4.46	1.03	4	4.49	.35	1
As a student teacher, I learned much from my student teaching experience	52	4.42	0.95	4	4.42	.23	2
Student teaching is the most valuable component of the teacher education program	52	4.34	1.01	4	4.41	.53	3
Student teaching was a positive experience	52	4.38	1.03	4	4.39	.22	4
My cooperating center was an excellent facility	52	4.42	.95	4	4.36	.31	5
I was thoroughly pleased with my overall student teaching experience	52	4.23	1.08	4	4.27	.29	6
Student teaching is a realistic example of actual teaching	52	4.34	1.00	4	3.94	.38	7

* Scale: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Unsure, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree

** Ranked by aggregate mean score